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THE BOSTON GLOBE
21 May 1982

US veto due if UN votes a cease-fire

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WASHINGTON - If Britain mounts a major invasion of the Falkland Islands, the United States would be prepared to veto an expected attempt to get a cease-fire resolution through the UN Security Council.

"The British have said they are not prepared to see a cease-fire without withdrawal of the Argentine forces," a senior Administration official said last night. "We will support them."

The official said that even though some military operations appear to have commenced, he would not rule out a last-minute diplomatic solution before British troops landed in large numbers.

"I'm not predicting it, but it's always possible [UN] Secretary General [Javier Perez] de Cuellar or someone might come up with an acceptable compromise before really heavy combat takes place."

Administration planners see a number of possible military scenarios - all aimed at ultimately securing a diplomatic settlement. They stress that the United States stands ready at all times to be of assistance if called upon.

At the White House, Vice President George Bush convened a rare meeting of the so-called "Special Situation Group" to discuss the Falklands dispute.

Participating in the hour-long session were Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, William P. Clark, the President's national

security adviser, Gen. David C. Jones, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Jeane Kirkpatrick, chief US delegate to the United Nations, and William Casey, director of central intelligence.

President Ronald Reagan did not take part, but met separately with Haig, according to Larry Speakes, deputy White House press secretary.

Despite many difficulties, most Administration officials, military and civilian, expect British forces to succeed in their Falklands operation.

The officials cite superior British training, tactics and weapons, the fact that there are many places that the approximately 4500 marines, paratroopers and commandos can come ashore without major resistance and the general belief that Argentine forces on the Falklands are having morale problems.

The single area where the Argentine forces have a telling advantage is in air power, which has not been much used in the seven weeks since they took over the islands.

From a military point of view, it would make sense to try to neutralize the Argentine air force by going after its bases on the mainland, either with high-flying Vulcan bombers or with hit-and-run commando raids.

Diplomats warn that any British military action on the mainland of Latin America is bound to

stir up a storm throughout the hemisphere and, particularly if large numbers of deaths occurred, might only harden Argentina's resistance to an eventual negotiated settlement.

But there were reports two days ago that a team of British military men was picked up along the coast in southern Argentina. If commando teams could slip in under darkness, blow up radars, fuel and aircraft and get away without many deaths, this might create fewer political problems than air strikes.

US military planners point out that the British fleet would be vulnerable to air attacks when concentrated off the Falklands coast during amphibious and helicopter assault. Furthermore, once the troops are on land, there is not much cover from potential air attack.

The British will bring in some effective air defense missiles, such as the Rapier, but 36 Harrier jets constitute a small force to defend both the fleet and troops ashore against, potentially, more than 100 attacking fighter-bombers.

But military planners believe that what the British must do is put in a very substantial force both north and south of the main Argentine concentration at Port Stanley if they hope to envelop them quickly and encourage large-scale surrenders.

Britain is said to be banking on a victory, rather than a military standoff, in order to force the ruling junta in Buenos Aires to become interested in terms that it found less than satisfactory before major hostilities.

But US officials say that while the British are willing to negotiate some kind of eventual transfer of sovereignty over the Falklands, they are determined to hold onto the distant South Georgia and Sandwich Islands.